

# HUMANISTS AND SOCIETY

a general statement  
of policy



BRITISH HUMANIST  
ASSOCIATION

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## A GENERAL STATEMENT OF POLICY

Humanists believe that man's conduct should be based on humanity, insight and reason. He must face his problems with his own moral and intellectual resources, without looking for supernatural aid. Our concern is with this life, which we try to make worthwhile and sufficient in itself. We make no claims to special knowledge or final answers, since we regard the search for understanding as a continuing process.

The following is a general statement of the views and standpoint of the British Humanist Association adopted by the Annual General Meeting of members in July 1967. Not all members of the Association agree with all that it says, but few dissent from the statement to any significant degree and motions for changes may be submitted to the Annual General Meeting. Detailed policies are elaborated in BHA resolutions, statements and pamphlets.

### INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: WAR: DISARMAMENT

1. We value the concept of the brotherhood of man, and therefore we support the United Nations. We recognise the growing interdependence of the nations of the world and favour the development of a greater degree of international co-operation. We deplore the cult of aggressive nationalism.
2. We support endeavours to tackle the problem of the arms race systematically—for example, by departments of conflict studies in universities.
3. We support cultural, economic and social exchange designed to foster a constructive co-existence between both governments and peoples.

### WORLD POPULATION AND RESOURCES

4. We deplore the widening gap between conditions of life in economically developed and under-developed countries and we call for increased but intelligent efforts to improve the situation of the latter. We commend particularly projects which minimise dependence on importation of goods and personnel from more developed countries.
5. We are alarmed at the totally inadequate measures so far taken to control the growth of world population, and therefore advocate far stronger measures at home and abroad to control population.
6. A desire for the prevention of human suffering and the enrichment of life underlies these policies, as does the realisation that natural resources must be conserved.

### THE SHAPE OF SOCIETY

7. We support the idea of an "open society", that is, a society in which people of different political, social and religious beliefs express and develop their different viewpoints but work together for the common good. We are working for a

society in which services provided for the community (such as education, health, welfare and law) are available for all without regard to belief, colour, sex, racial origin, wealth, or any similar criterion, and no special position is given to any particular group.

8. Such an open society is different from a pluralist one in which different beliefs are acknowledged but there are separate institutions (such as hospitals and schools) for each major religious or non-religious group. We believe that this inhibits co-operation and recognition of wider responsibilities and makes for too narrow a view of man and his world.
9. We uphold the principle of responsibility and self-dependence, and try to ensure that the social services facilitate rather than replace these. Indeed, we regard it as basic to the open society that its institutions—political, industrial, educational and other—provide for the maximum participation and consultation of all those concerned, whether as citizens, employees, pupils, consumers or in any other capacity.

## PARLIAMENTARY AND POLITICAL REFORM

10. We believe that Britain must face the problem of creating a genuinely democratic structure which will influence wisely the policies of a highly technical society. All men and women, not just technocrats, administrators and politicians should have their share of influence. This will demand a judicious balance between developing new political machinery and preserving the valuable parts of the old.
11. Government has to be made progressively more accountable to the electorate. We therefore welcome the innovation of a Parliamentary Commissioner or ombudsman as a step in the right direction and we support continued and constructive examination of all political institutions and practices.
12. In local government we wish to see the combination of good representation of local communities with informed professional decision-taking. Local communities may, of course, be the size of regions for some purposes, so that scarce skills and resources can be equitably distributed.

## EDUCATION

13. We believe that education should be given a higher priority in the allocation of national resources. It should be concerned to develop the imagination as well as to confer skills; to provide the foundation for the greatest possible fulfilment by the individual of his own potentialities; and to give everyone the chance of finding interests and occupations suited to his own talents.
14. Our particular aim is to improve the social and moral education of the young for a rewarding life both at home and in the community. Schools and colleges should model themselves as far as possible on the open society, place the minimum of reliance on authoritarian methods, and be more informed by sociological and psychological research.



15. The school should regard itself as an agent of social action within the wider community and thus enable children to learn from experience the problems and rewards of social responsibility.
16. Children are individual people, not private possessions of their parents. The community should ensure that they receive certain basic opportunities. This is already recognised in the provision of compulsory education and in the laws preventing parents from ill treating children. It should be extended to include the right of the child to learn of different systems of belief and attitudes of mind, and to make a personal choice between them. Parents will naturally tend to prejudice their children in favour of their own beliefs; the school should redress the balance by making other views known. It follows from this that we deplore the existence of denominational schools, just as we would deplore schools where one particular political view was taught. The setting up of schools where religion would be a forbidden subject is not a humanist solution.
17. Of the systems of education proposed in Britain, that which seems best to fulfil our ideals is the comprehensive system.

## **THE ARTS, LEISURE AND MAN'S PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

18. We believe that man needs and attempts continuously to come to terms with himself, his world and the conditions of his existence. This calls for care to avoid unnecessary pollution of the physical environment, for a respect for life and living things, for the furtherance of knowledge, through the sciences, and of awareness, through the arts. Art is a means of self-expression and communication, essential to the full realisation of man's potentialities. We call for much greater support for the arts, and the creative use of leisure and recreation, but with constant examination of the way such support is given, so as to ensure maximum popular participation. In the architecture and planning of our towns and cities, and in our treatment of the coastline and countryside, attention must be given to aesthetic and social as well as to commercial values.

## **THE LAW AND MORALITY**

19. The law should never be used specifically to enforce a code of morality. Laws and institutions should be revised to allow the maximum of personal freedom whilst protecting the interests of the vulnerable. Individual variation makes nonsense of rigid codes applied indiscriminately to all men and women.
20. We are in favour of freedom of choice in matters of marriage and of sexual conduct between consenting adults. Society should not ostracise those who do not conform to the accepted norm, unless they are harming others. We consider that unrestricted availability of family planning facilities is a social necessity and a human right. We call for a thorough-going review of the laws relating to family and sexual relationships. This will involve changes in the existing

laws relating to divorce, the rights of children and parents, legitimacy, family property, abortion and of sexual relationships outside marriage (including homosexual relationships).

21. We believe that the development of the social sciences is the necessary basis of an informed and humane approach to these problems.

## **CENSORSHIP**

22. We oppose censorship as a threat not only to the personal freedoms of the individual artist and his audience but also to political liberty. Apart from very special circumstances, we believe that "censorship" is best exercised by the individual.
23. Social concern should not be confined to sexual matters but should be addressed to commercial and other pressures. We call for increased research into fields such as the effects of the constant portrayal of violence and of the preponderance of trivia in the mass media.

## **RELIGION IN SOCIETY**

24. We welcome the fact that it is now more widely recognised that Britain is a mixed community of Christians, Humanists, Jews, Moslems, Sikhs and others: that it is no longer properly regarded as "a Christian country". We therefore call for the disestablishment of the Church of England and the revision of the religious policies of the BBC and ITA. Similarly, we hold that religious observances should not be mixed with public functions such as courts of law and parliamentary or council meetings. Other laws giving the Christian religion a special status should be repealed and the churches should have the same status as all other voluntary bodies. The legal concept of a charity needs to be revised. No employer should have the right to demand of actual or prospective employees any information concerning their beliefs, except where this is directly relevant to their work.
25. In schools all religions should be dealt with, when necessary, from an educational standpoint. The present law requiring an act of worship each day and instruction in religion should be repealed; and such practices should be excluded from state schools.

## **CRIME AND PENAL POLICY: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION: CIVIL LIBERTIES**

26. We oppose retributive punishment and wish to promote reformatory penal policies. Legal and penal practices must be more informed by biological, sociological and psychological research.
27. We oppose racial discrimination in any form, and we support legislation and social action to outlaw such discrimination.
28. We hold that individual liberties need continuing and vigilant protection. Effective machinery is needed to detect and deal with breaches of the law by those whose business it is to enforce it.



## SCIENCE

29. With the growth of knowledge and skills and the consequent development of research by teams requiring expensive equipment, an international science policy is needed if resources are not be squandered. National and commercial barriers to the exchange of knowledge impede progress. This policy must co-ordinate research between different disciplines without inhibiting the initiative and imagination of the individual scientist.
30. A much greater development of social, psychological and biological research is needed. Research should aim at furthering human and animal welfare rather than at prestige or national military advantage.
31. A greater degree of social responsibility in the fields of science and technology is needed on the part of scientists, technologists and those responsible for directing their efforts.

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

32. We welcome the increasing skills of the staff of these services and believe that considerable expansion is required. We call for more studies of community needs and the efficiency and humanity of the services provided. We support an increase in emphasis on preventive services.
33. We approve of efforts being made to rationalise the too numerous voluntary and statutory social agencies. Although we ourselves run the Humanist Counselling Service and support the Humanist Housing Association and the Independent Adoption Society, we do not in principle welcome the formation of yet more voluntary social agencies. Where there is a gap which under the present system is our responsibility, we try to fill it, but in general we call upon the community to accept such work as its own responsibility.

## ECONOMICS: WAGES POLICY: SOCIAL INSURANCE

34. The major political parties are predominantly concerned with economic issues, and we encourage our members to play an active part in the affairs of these parties. Accordingly, we do not attempt to provide another forum for the discussion of economic issues along traditional party lines.
35. We are, however, concerned about the effect of policies, organisations and institutional arrangements on people, and in particular on the quality of the human relationships (especially in industry) that result from them. To this end we are attracted by schemes to involve people in re-organising their work—particularly work such as assembly line production—so as to make it more satisfying. We advocate greatly increased consultation and participation in decision-taking within industry, not only as a means of promoting industrial peace but also as the moral right of the employees.

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